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History, Structure, and Revolution in the Shi'ite Tradition in Contemporary Iran

SAID AMIR ARJOMAND

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to draw theoretical lessons from the contemporary transformation of Shi'ism by examining the bearing of history, structure and cultural tradition on the causes and consequences of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It is argued that the Islamic Revolution can be viewed as the traditionalization of a modernizing nation-state, and at the same time the modernization of the Shi'ite tradition. This apparently paradoxical characterization strongly suggests that a Weberian paradigm for culturally specific patterns of social change is more helpful for its comprehension than any alternative model.

Few would dispute that the Islamic Revolution in Iran is one of the major events of the twentieth century, or that it is theoretically as significant as any of the great revolutions of modern times. But where, exactly, does its significance lie? Is it significant primarily for falsifying theories of modernization? Or for demonstrating the vitality of religion in modern politics? Or for showing that secularization could be reversible to the point of establishment of theocracy? Or for proving the significance of "de-differentiation" (Tiryakian, 1985)? Or for suggesting that social change can be cyclical as much as unilineally evolutionary? Does the Islamic Revolution in Iran demolish the Comtean model of uniform and universal social evolution? Does it affirm the Weberian vision of culturally specific paths of social evolution determined by the institutionalization of different value-ideas?

I

The inadequacy of the conventional view that portrays politics as a mere reflection of society is gaining increasing recognition in the social sciences, as in the "new institutionalism" (March and Olsen, 1985). Nowhere is this inadequacy more glaring than in the study of long-term socio-political transformation, which highlights the importance of history, structure and culture. History is important in two related ways: historical contingencies often determine the direction taken at major turning points in the process of socio-political transformation, and the prevailing forces of the formative periods of institutionalization leave a permanent mark on the institutional

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structure of the societies concerned. Structure is important for the following reasons: the institutional structure of society constitutes the framework within which the material and ideal goals of the political actors are defined and pursued; it has its own exigencies, requirements and potential for development; and it sets serious limits to feasible change, thereby assuring some measure of continuity through any socio-political transformation.

Last, but by no means least, the cultural tradition is an important factor in the dynamics and the teleology of socio-political transformation: it is the source from which the idiom of popular protest is drawn, and the repertory of the value-ideas whose selective institutionalization determines the direction of socio-political change. In fact, the emergence of an autonomous cultural tradition—resting, in Eisenstadt's (1981, 1986) formulation, on the institutionalization of the tension between the transcendental and the mundane in the "post-Axial Age civilizations"—can be considered the fundamental precondition of teleological or directional socio-political change set in motion by ideological politics and political revolutions.

II

Let us begin with the seeds of the present revolutionary transformation of Iran contained in the Shi'ite tradition. Shi'ism, the "heterodox" branch of Islam, in fact, evolved side by side with "orthodox" Sunnism. Their mutually oriented doctrinal articulation and self-definition occurred concomitantly in the formative period of development of Islamic institutions (Hodgson, 1974, vol. 1). They therefore represent the two main coeval variants of Islam as a world religion of salvation.

Shi'ite Islam as a world religion of salvation has had considerable transformative potential. This potential acted upon the structure of the Iranian polity once Twelver Shi'ism was declared the state religion of the rising Safavid empire in 1501. By the early nineteenth century, Shi'ism had transformed the societal structure of domination in Iran. The typical Islamic "caesaropapist" political order of the late Middle Ages has given way to a dual structure of domination in which an autonomous hierocracy—the Shi'ite *'ulama*—exercised its religio-legal authority independently of the ruler and the state (Arjomand, 1984).

From one point of view, it is possible, indeed cogent, to regard the establishment of an Islamic theocracy ruled by the Shi'ite *'ulama* as the last stage of the evolution of clerical authority in Shi'ite Islam, an evolution that was checked but not reversed by the centralization and modernization of the state in the twentieth century. By the early decades of the Qajar period (1785–1925), the Shi'ite hierocracy had freed itself from the tutelage of political authority characteristic of the Safavid era (1501–1722) and secured its autonomy. The next logical possibility was to assert the *superiority* of the hierocracy over the state by extending clerical authority to the political sphere. This logical possibility was explored and actualized when Ayatollah Khomeini transformed a sizeable section of the Shi'ite hierocracy into a revolutionary political party. The projected final stage of the growth of Shi'ite clerical authority then became the blueprint of the militant clerics who overthrew the Shah.

In mobilizing the Iranian masses for the revolution that was to realize Shi'ite clerical rule on behalf of God and the Hidden Imam, Khomeini and his followers drew on the cult of martyrdom which constitutes the major component of the Shi'ite theodicy of suffering, and on the millenarian elements in the Shi'ite tradition. The glorification of martyrdom and the assimilation of the revolutionary struggle against

the Shah to Imam Husayn's uprising against the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid, in the desert of Karbala in 680 A.D., have received ample attention in the coverage of the Iranian revolution by the media. Suffice it to add that Moharram was the decisive month for the defeat of the Shah, and that the massive protest marches, during which Khomeini was formally declared the Imam of an Islamic government to replace the monarchy, took place on the *'Ashura*, the day of martyrdom of Imam Hosayn in Karbala (Arjomand, 1988a: 134). The drawing forth of the millenarian beliefs in the Shi'ite tradition, however, requires a somewhat more extensive comment.

The idea of the Mahdi, "the rightly-guided one," as the expected restorer of the true religion and redresser of injustices, enters the history of Islam in general and of Shi'ism in particular during the second civil war in the 680s, shortly after the death of Imam Hosayn in Karbala. It became a distinctive belief of the radical Shi'ite sects, and was incorporated into the Twelver Shi'ite doctrine in the ninth and early tenth centuries as a result of the doctrinal effort to solve the prolonged crisis of succession to the eleventh Imam. The twelfth Imam was said to be in Occultation until the End of Time, when he would reappear as the Mahdi. The Mahdi was thus identified with the Hidden Imam, and its eschatological features became more pronounced after the tenth century (Madelung, 1986).

The rise of the Safavids can be considered the first successful Shi'ite revolution in Iran. The leader of the Safavid movement, Shah Isma'il I (1501–1524), claimed to be the Mahdi and was worshipped by his Turkoman followers as the incarnation of God. His millenarian movement turned the Turkoman tribesmen into a zealous fighting force for the conquest of Iran and its subsequent conversion to Shi'ism. Once in power, the Safavid rulers modified their millenarian claims to being the lieutenants of the Hidden Imam, and their reign was said to continue until His reappearance as the Mahdi (Arjomand, 1984: esp. 182–183). The Shi'ism spread in Iran by the *'ulama* under the patronage of the Safavid rulers was more quietistic than the extremist faith of the conquering Turkmen. It did *contain* millenarianism, by emphasizing that the Hidden Imam would remain in hiding and yet fulfil the functions of the Imamate, but could not eradicate it. The belief in the Mahdi remained inescapably chiliastic, and would from time to time be activated, the most notable instance being the rise of the Bab and the Babi rebellions in the mid-nineteenth century.

By the 1970s, the plausibility of the belief in the return of the Hidden Imam as the Mahdi after eleven hundred years of concealment was seriously undermined among educated individuals. The lay Islamic ideologue, Ali Shari'ati (1971), interpreted the belief in the return of the Hidden Imam as the allegory of the imminent revolution of the oppressed masses of the Third World. It is interesting to note that in this period, the late Ayatollah Motahhari, one of the chief intellectual figures of the Islamic Revolution, rejected this politicized interpretation of the Mahdistic tenet, but nevertheless offered an allegorical interpretation of his own: the idea of the Mahdi as the restorer of justice and the true religion contained the utopia of the perfect society to be gradually approximated and realized only at the end of the process of human evolution (Motahhari, 1975).

Given this climate of educated opinion and the general anti-millenarian attitude of the Shi'ite hierocracy, it is not surprising that Khomeini did not make any explicit millenarian claims. Without claiming to be the returning Mahdi, however, he ingeniously exploited the Shi'ite Messianic yearning by encouraging his acclamation as the Imam from about 1970 onward. Never since the majority of them had become Shi'ite in the sixteenth century had the Iranians called any living person Imam. An

unmistakably apocalyptic mood was observable during the fateful month of Moharram 1399 (December, 1978) among the masses in Tehran. Furthermore, with the fourteenth Islamic century about to expire and a new one to begin, the quasi-millennial charisma of the man they called Imam was compounded for the young militant clerics by his image as the Renovator (*mojadded*) of the century. Intense discussions were raging as to whether or not Khomeini was the Imam of the Age and the Lord of Time. Those who answered in the affirmative, or were at least ready to regard him as the Mahdi's precursor, were undoubtedly among the millions who massed in the streets of Tehran to welcome the returning Ayatollah in February 1979, and whose frenzy was to be televised across the globe.

The success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 seemed incredible enough to at least some of the revolutionaries themselves to generate millenarian expectations and restore the plausibility of the Mahdistic tenet. On the birthday of the Hidden Imam in June 1981, Hojjat al-Islam Mohammadi Rayshahri, Prosecutor General of the Revolutionary Courts and later Minister of Intelligence, published a pamphlet entitled *The Continuation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran until the Global Revolution of the Mahdi* which was reissued with an added chapter exactly a year later (Mohammadi Rayshahri, 1982). It expounded the emerging belief in the continuation of the Islamic Revolution until the coming of the Mahdi. This belief bears a striking similarity to the claim that the Safavid rule would continue until the advent of the Hidden Imam. It gained additional impetus from Iran's successes in the war with Iraq during the summer of 1982. In a speech to the Majlis (Iranian parliament) in September 1982, Hojjat al-Islam Rezvani, the clerical representative of Firuzabad, predicted the defeat of Iraq as a prelude to marching on Jerusalem. Adducing a number of Traditions relating to the Mahdi, he added that the purpose of the march on Jerusalem would be to acclaim the reappearance of the Hidden Imam as the Mahdi, and to witness the reappearance of Jesus Christ and his final conversion to Islam by the Mahdi (*Keyhan*, 17 Shahrivar 1361/8 September 1982). In November 1982, *Sorush*, the intellectual journal of the Islamic radicals, published an article on "The Connectedness of the Two Movements" (those of Khomeini and the Mahdi), in which the slogan "O God, O God, keep Khomeini until the Revolution of the Mahdi" was recommended to the reader as a constant prayer. The article referred to an earlier interview in which a wounded man had reported having met the Mahdi on the front and having been told by him that the above prayer had expedited His return by a few hundred years.

III

We can now turn to the crucial importance of the dual societal structure of domination that became established in Iran at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Norms of authority in the world religions of salvation can contain significant implications not only for religious ranking but also for political stratification. Shi'ite Islam contains several norms of authority which have such implications. The above-mentioned Mahdistic tenet contains the norm of charismatic authority in which religious and political authority are fused in the person of the supreme leader. As we have seen, this norm was activated directly by the founder of the Safavid empire and indirectly by Khomeini and his followers.

A second historically important norm of authority in Shi'ism can be found in the *Akhbari* (Traditionalist) tendency in Shi'ism, and concedes only *de facto* religious authority to the compilers of the Traditions of the Prophet and the Imams. I have

argued that the *Akhbari* tendency, which was dominant in much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, indirectly encouraged the fusion of religious and political authority, and directly militated against the consolidation of differentiated religio-political authority (Arjomand, 1984: ch. 5).

Lastly, we have the Shi'ite norm of the juristic authority of the specialists in religious learning. By the early nineteenth century, the institutionalization of this norm resulted in the independence of the hierocracy from the state, which was enhanced by its continued evolution throughout the century to become the distinctive feature of Shi'ite Islam in contrast to Sunnism. In contradistinction to the previous two norms, the juristic principle established differentiated religious authority *de jure* and thus created a basis on which hierocratic authority could be consolidated alongside political authority *and independent of it.*

The autonomy of the Shi'ite hierocracy assured its survival despite the relentless pressure from the state in the twentieth century. The modernization of the state did entail a drastic diminution of the institutional prerogatives and social power of the hierocracy. However, it did not impair the legitimacy of the exclusive hierocratic authority of the *'ulama*, which assured the continued financial independence of the hierocracy. Consequently, it not only survived but also withstood the Pahlavi state's challenge to its virtually exclusive control over religious learning and over the authoritative interpretation of Shi'ite Islam.

IV

Twentieth-century history has impinged upon the Shi'ite tradition in such a way as to produce a revolution that has resulted in the establishment of a theocracy. The limitation of space only allows us to consider the consequences of the most important general trend of the twentieth century. The reader interested in the consequences of more specific historical contingencies for the success of the Islamic Revolution and for its direction can be referred to another work (Arjomand, 1988a: Pt. 2).

The creation of centralized bureaucratic states has been identified as a fundamental precondition of modern revolutions (Baechler, 1975; Eisenstadt, 1978; Goldstone, 1982; Arjomand, 1986). It requires the concentration of coercive, material and cultural resources and thus entails dispossession of some privileged strata. Such dispossessed strata are prominently represented among revolutionary leaders throughout history (Arjomand, 1986). In Iran, state-building made serious headway only under the Pahlavis (1921–79). In this period of centralization and modernization, the state initiated a series of reforms which seriously undermined the foundations of religious authority and curbed its cultural influence.

The erosion of clerical control over education had begun earlier, even before the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11. But it culminated in the creation of a secular, national educational system under Reza Shah in the 1920s and 1930s. Control over education was the least defensible of clerical prerogatives as it was a contingent fact, lacking any doctrinal basis. More defensible citadels also fell under the attack of the centralizing state. The major defeat of the hierocracy was in the legal sphere, where clerical domination rested on a firm doctrinal basis. Under Reza Shah, the judiciary was secularized and centralized as a branch of the state. Finally, the Endowment Act of 1934 established centralized supervision over religious endowments throughout Iran that had largely been under direct or delegated control of the *'ulama* (Akhavi, 1980: 33, 40, 56–58). Though less important in its consequences than his father's

policies, Mohammad Reza Shah's Land Reform of the 1960s resulted in the redistribution of land owned by mosques, seminaries and individual clerics. The hierocracy's remaining links to the state through the supervision of the religious endowments were virtually broken. Religious institutions became totally independent of the state; and this independence was sustained by the one last source of income which was inevitably immune from state encroachment: the voluntary payment of religious taxes to the leaders of the Shi'ite hierocracy as the deputies of the Hidden Imam.

These developments seriously weakened the hierocracy. But they also had another important consequence: the differentiation and separation of religious and political powers became complete. The loss of judicial and educational functions on the one hand, and the loss of control of religious endowment and land ownership on the other, meant that the Shi'ite hierocracy became largely "disembedded" from the Pahlavi regime. This economic and political disengagement of the hierocracy was strongly complemented by their social "disembeddedness": there had always been a tendency for the upper echelons of the hierocracy to intermarry, forming a highly endogamous group, the entry into which by bright young men was often accompanied by marriage to daughters or close relatives of their teachers. This tendency was accentuated by the *'ulama*'s loss of social prestige, which greatly reduced the frequency of intermarriage between them and the increasingly secularized social and political elites.

Eisenstadt (1978: 245–246) has emphasized the importance of the autonomy and disembeddedment of a leading social stratum for the generation of revolutionary social change. Oberschall (1973: 118–124, 129–132) demonstrated the importance of the "segmentation" of a solitary communal group from the ruling strata as a condition favorable to political mobilization; Tilly (1978) that of group solidarity, resting on common identity and a network of organized interaction, as a mobilizational asset for political contenders. In the light of these considerations, it is not difficult to see the disengagement of the Shi'ite *'ulama* from the Pahlavi regime as a crucial factor in the causation of the first traditionalist revolution in modern history, and their solidarity as a tightly knit status group in control of autonomous religious institutions, in its success.

V

Nothing within the Shi'ite tradition and institutions can explain the internal crumbling and paralysis of the Pahlavi state which caused the revolution of 1979. However, the Shi'ite cultural tradition and institutional structure had everything to do with the consequences of that revolution. The autonomous structure of hierocratic authority in Shi'ism enabled Khomeini and the militant clerics to win the revolutionary power struggle, and the Shi'ite cultural tradition crucially influenced the teleology of the Islamic revolution and the shape of the post-revolutionary regime.

Khomeini led the revolutionary movement against the Shah to restore and preserve a Shi'ite tradition threatened by modernization and Westernization. The Islamic Revolution is undoubtedly a traditionalist revolution. However, the restoration of a tradition in practice always entails its *transformation*. In fact, the traditionalist revolution of 1979 has brought about a revolution *in* Shi'ism. The ideological revolution in contemporary Shi'ism has been treated in detail elsewhere (Arjomand, 1988b), as have the distinctive institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran that represent the unfolding of the distinctively Shi'ite teleology of the Islamic Revolution (Arjomand, 1988a: ch. 8). Here some general observations should suffice. We see

both continuity and change between the pre- and post-revolution societal structure of domination in Iran. The cultural and institutional changes in post-revolution Shi'ism bear the imprint of the historical contingencies that produced them. One of the unintended consequences of the direct take-over of the state by the clerical elite in 1980, to give an important example, has been the extension of the principle of bureaucratic organization from the state to the hitherto organizationally amorphous Shi'ite hierocracy itself. Nevertheless, these changes are also distinctively Shi'ite in that they are modifications and extensions of elements of pre-revolution Shi'ism. Most notable among these is the sweeping extension of hierocratic authority. This and other modifications and extensions are both stimulated and delimited by the logical possibilities of the original traditional elements. The latter therefore partly determine the direction of the contemporary socio-political transformation of Shi'ism. This transformation, consequently, represents a pattern of social change that is culturally specific.

If the structure of hierocratic domination in post-revolution Iran is marked by continuity as well as change, so is the structure of political domination. Theocratic rule—that is, the replacement of the post-Safavid dual structure of authority by theocratic monism—and the sacralization of political authority represent the most important aspect of revolutionary change. However, elements of continuity between pre- and post-revolution structures of political domination are equally striking. Despite the intention of Khomeini and the militant Ayatollahs to shrink the state to a modest size, the growth of the bureaucratic state has not been checked. In fact, the Iranian state now employs twice as many people as it did on the eve of the Islamic Revolution (Arjomand, 1988a: 173).

Finally, continuity and change in the legal sphere require a brief discussion. Even before the revolution, Khomeini, in his manual of practical jurisprudence had sought to make the Shi'ite law more practical and accommodating of some modern conditions. For example, he had given "the knowledge of the judge" based on written and other modern forms of evidence preponderance over the unpractical traditional rules of evidence. Since the revolution, his cautiously modernizing approach to jurisprudence has been continued by his successor-designate, Ayatollah Montazeri. Much more importantly, the Islamic Revolution has transformed the Shi'ite Sacred Law from a "jurists' law" (Weber, 1978: 820–821) to an increasingly codified public law of the Iranian state. Alongside this revolutionary transformation of Shi'ite law (Arjomand, 1988a: ch. 9), there is considerable continuity between pre- and post-revolution legal systems. Despite the Islamicization of the legal system there has been considerable continuity with regard to the legislative function of the Majlis, the substance of the laws, and the administration of justice. Khomeini and the militant clerics preserved the Majlis, the heritage of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Although its legislation is subject to the approval of the clerical jurists of a Council of Guardians, it has shown great vigor and has enacted an impressive body of laws. These include the revision of the Commercial, Civil and other Codes of the Pahlavi era. The revised Codes now appear Islamicized by bearing the approval of the clerical jurists of the Council of Guardians. In this fashion, an enormous amount of legal material from the European-based laws of the Pahlavi era has been incorporated into the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Similarly, the hierarchical organization of courts in the Ministry of Justice set up under Reza Shah, which was modeled on the continental European judiciary systems, has been taken over by the Islamic regime, with many of its secular judges continuing to serve.

The leaders of the Islamic Revolution in Iran recognize this borrowing, even though they would rather not talk about it. In an outburst in December 1984 against the recalcitrant traditionalists who considered taxation at variance with the Islamic Sacred Law, the shrewd Majlis Speaker, Hojjat al-Islam Hashemi-Rafsanjani remarked:

> Is whatever occurs in the Western world contrary to the Sacred Law? . . . You are sitting in Parliament. Where is the precedent for parliament in Islamic history? . . . [or for] a president, cabinet of ministers, prime minister and the like? . . . You say that no *fatvas* [injunctions] were issued [in support of] taxes. No *fatvas* were issued for a great many things. In fact, we lack *fatvas* in Islam for 80 per cent of the things on which today we base Islamic government. (cited in Bakhash, 1987: 113)

VI

The Islamic Revolution in Iran has set in motion a culturally specific pattern of social change which is distinctively Shi'ite. At the same time, however, it has reinforced some universal trends, the most important being the growth of the bureaucratic state and the rationalization of the legal order.

By saying that the case of the contemporary transformation of Shi'ism in Iran compels us to discard the simple Comtean model of unilineal evolution in favor of a Weberian model of culturally specific social change, I think we are also answering the rest of the questions raised at the beginning of this article. If we accept this position, cyclical and linear trends in social change can be seen to intersect at the starting point of the revolution. "De-differentiation" in the form of charismatic fundamentalism occurs with the cry of "Back to the Book!" The basic values of a world religion can be seen to "take on less differentiated and flexible form in order to revitalize utterly key principles of a tradition, but thereby retract legitimation from many practically important institutions" (Lidz, 1982: 293). As this outbreak of charismatic fundamentalism is followed by routinization, linear trends in institutionalization and rationalization set in. The similarities between modern political revolutions and traditional millenarian uprisings of the post-Axial Age cease to seem paradoxical. Finally, there would not be any paradox in saying that the Islamic Revolution in Iran represents both the traditionalization of a modernizing nation-state and the modernization of the Shi'ite tradition, a tradition endowed with the usual transformative potential of the world religions of salvation.

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Biographical Note

SAID AMIR ARJOMAND is Professor of Sociology at State University of New York at Stony Brook, N.Y. He has written extensively on Iran and Shi'ism. His latest books are *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* SUNY Press, 1988). ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, State University of New York, Stony Brook NY 11794-4356, U.S.A.